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While Redfern Riots, Whites do Battle

BY PETER JULL

The riot of Aboriginal men, women, and children against police in inner Sydney's inner Redfern district one sweltering summer Sunday night in February 2004 was an unmistakable political statement by indigenous peoples. Apart from the measured and sensible comments of Australia's one Aboriginal parliamentarian, Aden Ridgeway, however, the domestic political Establishment merely fell back on platitudes about the hard lives of policemen, or said nothing, or launched into florid silliness.

New South Wales opposition leader Brogden was quick to say that he'd bulldoze Redfern to remove the problem. This impressed few, however, and some days later he told the *Sydney Morning Herald* 'he had both a compassionate and tough approach to indigenous affairs, arguing that his comments on Monday about bulldozing Redfern's Block did not mean he had no empathy for children who knew only poverty and despair.' His bulldozer stood out there large and unlovely as the Liberal response for ten days until his Prime Minister spoke (see below).

World media picked up the message 'loud and clear', however. Major print and broadcast reports placed the riot squarely in the context of black disadvantage, white discrimination, and failed or non-existent policies. CNN headed its online report, "'Alienation' in Australia", using Ridgeway's accurate word, while a sub-heading read 'Third World Problems'.

A recent spate of comment pieces in the press by some of the usual suspects – Janet Albrechtsen, Gary Johns, Keith Windschuttle – attacking indigenous programs and advocating assimilation on moral or economic or 'law and order' grounds has many indigenous people wondering if there is a coordinated attack underway. But Melbourne's Andrew Bolt leaves no doubt in a remarkable response to Redfern, 'PM's riot rescue', *Herald Sun*, 20-2-04:

'It took the Tampa to save John Howard from what seemed certain defeat at the last election. Now, again facing defeat, Howard may be miraculously saved by his second Tampa -- the Redfern race riot. ... How much John Howard needs a bit of that magic. And what a reason he's been given to echo [New Zealand's new conservative opposition leader] Brash's warnings, now that we've seen in the Redfern riot the future of the ethnic separatism that our governments have so foolishly funded. It is already racist and divisive enough that we have an Aboriginal-only "parliament" in ATSIC, as well as taxpayer-funded Aboriginal-only services such as the Aboriginal Legal Service, Aboriginal health services, Aboriginal housing bodies and the like. ... And we can see already what our drift backwards into tribalism is bringing us. Squabbles over which race or ethnic group deserves what. ... Arguments over whose ancestors did what to whom, and who should now pay. The parading of old wounds and endless demands for compensation. The insistence on racial

differences most of us would otherwise have never noticed. The vilification of our past and the cramping of our future. Redfern.'

He winds up, *'This is the issue that could be Howard's new Tampa – an appeal to voters to save this country from the New Racists who seek to divide us, using our government and our money.'* (His branding of anti-racism as 'the New Racism' will catch the eye of alert university students writing essays this semester, one may be sure.)

Windschuttle would shut down the ancient homelands of Aboriginal peoples and move their inhabitants to the city. Just in case we don't react to the foolishness or outrageousness of many of these proposals, *The Australian* and others begin their editorial endorsements with gratuitous attacks on, e.g., 'White intellectuals who grandstand on Aboriginal disadvantage' (*The Australian*, March 1). These incitements to white-on-white abuse have almost nothing to do with their stated subject of indigenous peoples.

Whether tempted by Bolt or not, the Prime Minister's first foray into Redfern comment was mostly irrelevant but clearly aimed at stirring the prejudiced white voter. Asked by a Melbourne broadcaster on February 26, 'Do you accept that these are race-based riots?', he replied:

'I think they arise from a combination of factors. I think they arise from the total breakdown in family authority within aboriginal communities. I think they sometimes arise from a policy perhaps of treating different groups in the community differently. The solution very much lies in treating everybody equally and as part of the mainstream as far as law enforcement is concerned.'

The typically difficult policy and political struggle of a modern nation-state with entrenched indigenous problems is well illustrated in Robert Tickner's *Taking a Stand*, recording the early to mid 1990s era of bipartisanship in Australia. What a jolt followed those years! Now polemicists write back and forth in the press to settle old scores with liberal or Left rivals, while national government talks of bestowing some 'compassion' on blighted indigenes. Aborigines and Islanders have policy (or at least rhetoric) done to them, no longer with them. Locally the White Man prefers tough policing and plentiful jailing as 'communication' with and control of dark-skinned people. Functions, powers, funds, leadership are taken away from indigenous peoples, and the remaining drip of welfare-type programs is ballyhooed as 'practical reconciliation'. A government with officials unable to talk about war and peace is also unlikely to listen to predictions of where such policy is leading. The angry Redfern crowd has given us a preview.

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